1:Campbell E-5 (1954-1955)1964
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I

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

1. VLACHS

In continental Greece north of Corinth the observant traveller is soon aware of communities of Greek-speaking transhumant shepherds known as Sarakatsani (Σαρακατσάνοι, or Σαρακατσαναῖοι). In the plains it is unnecessary even to leave the main roads to see small groups of circular, domed, huts of wood and thatch, or flocks of sheep and goats guarded by shepherds dressed in rough black suits and immense goat-hair capes woven from the fleeces of their own animals. From May until the first days of November these semi-nomad shepherds graze their considerable flocks on the higher slopes of the mountains, generally 3,000–6,000 feet above sea level; during the remainder of the year they live in the coastal plains. Simple facts of climate and relief, snow on the high ground in winter, in the summer burning heat in the plains, encourage this transhumance in a geographical area physically dominated by the ranges of the Pindus massif and the southern extremity of the Rhodope mountains. Epirus, Thessaly, Macedonia, and Thrace are the provinces in which they are most numerous but communities are found further south in continental Greece and some groups are established in the north of the Peloponnese and Euboea. In the whole of Greece their number, perhaps, approaches eighty thousand,[1] a population which was possibly absolutely greater a hundred years ago, but was certainly relatively more considerable as a fraction of the total inhabitants of the area.

The Greek villagers generally refer to the Sarakatsani simply as Vlachs (βλάχοι), that is shepherds who, in step with the rhythm of the seasons, lead their animals alternately down to the plains and up to the mountains. The occupational reference of the word, Vlach,[2] is an old one, already in use during the Byzantine period.

[1] Mme Chatzimichalis arrives at a total of 81,473. Ἀγγελική Χατζημιχάλη, Σαρακατσάνοι, Athens, 1937, vol. i, Part A, p. νβ'.

[2] See e.g. Anna Comnena, Ed. Bonn., i, p. 395. One of a number of references quoted by Mme Chatzimichalis, op. cit., vol. i, Part A, p. κ'.

reached to the ground, capes of so coarse a weave and so stiff with rain that they looked as though their incumbents could almost step forth and leave them standing like sentry boxes. I next saw them in March the following year, when I was riding across Greek Macedonia and stayed a night in one of their smoky wigwams. Since then I had seen them again and again, all over northern Greece, in the plains in winter and in the mountains in summer, but always on the skyline or in the middle distance. True nomads, these self-appointed Ishmaels hover on the outskirts of ordinary Greek life as fleetingly as a mirage, only manifesting themselves to ordinary mortals in far-away glimpses. Suddenly, at a ravine's twist far from the scorched lowlands, one comes across their impermanent hamlets of conical huts on high ledges of the Pindus and the Rhodope mountains and in the sierras of Roumeli; and in winter, gazing down from the snows that have banished them, one can discern their clustering huts in the plains, the ascending smoke, and the slowly grazing flocks.

Every spring their beasts and their long caravans of horses, laden with all they possess, can be seen winding up into the thawed mountains, or halted around a sudden village of somber tents, to stream downhill again later to the withered autumnal plains which the rains will soon turn green. One discovers them binding lopped branches and osier twigs into the hemispherical skeletons of the huts which will house them for the season; shelters whose blackened and molting thatch will later mark where they have settled for a few months and vanished from again. Sometimes a far-off barking and the murmur of bells hint at their presence deep in the ilex woods or along a dazzling canyon where nothing stirs except, perhaps, a pair of floating eagles. Besides these rare apparitions, this fugitive community of about eighty thousand souls and of flocks amounting to several million head seems to have the gift of invisibility.

UNLIKE the seminomads of Greece — the Koutzovlachs and the Karagounis, who all have mountain villages from which to migrate and to which they return after their half-yearly journeys in search of winter pasture — the Sarakatsáns have nothing more solid than their abodes of wicker and rush. All of them, however, look to some range of mountains, some fold or cordillera where they have grazed their flocks for centuries of summers, as their home. Their lowland pastures are more variable, an uncertain sojourn with few claims on their allegiance. At the turn of the century the Sarakatsáns of northern Greece were the

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233 182 318 However, if these last paragraphs have brought out the influence that the geographical and biological environment has had on the Sarakatsani, it is necessary also to mention the influence which their activity as herders has on the landscape itself.

233 318 For an observer it is easy to identify the area occupied by our herders. In those regions the ground is close-cropped. Seen from a sufficient distance it seems dotted with shrubs between which a sparse vegetation gives the impression of a green or yellowish carpet. In the valleys the shrubs are absent. But the carpet is always there, testifying to the presence of the flocks. Nature carries the [161] imprint of the passage of Sarakatsani and this on a very considerable scale in view of their number (according to approximate reckonings they represent a population of 90,000 to /21/ 110,000) and the number of their livestock which represents the core of sheep herding in Greece.

The effects of this imprint on the climate, the temperature and the water courses are evident.

If the life of the Sarakatsani is closely dependent on nature, the latter, in turn, is transformed by them in a manner which is just as significant.

Geographically speaking, these phenomena are noted around the large mountain ranges of the country, whether one looks at Pindus and its ramifications (Agrapha, Orthrys, Vardoussia, Parnassus), the Olympus chain including the Chassia, Vermion, Kaimaktsalan, or the Rodhopi chain including Phalakron, etc.

361 The Sarakatsani establish themselves on the slopes as well as in the valleys. The country they prefer is continintal Greece.

There are none on the islands or in the Peloponnesus. However, [174] we have reason to believe that there used to be some Sarakatsani groups in the northern Peloponnesus. But from all evidence, they were rapidly assimilated and have become peasants.

Thus their geographical habitat is confined to the areas we have